

# Thucydides: the universal historian?

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**T**hucydides is our main source for the history of the struggle between Athens and Sparta in the fifth century B.C. For many devoted readers, however, he is something more: a timeless guide to the science and art of historiography, or to the universal principles of politics and power. Here Neville Morley explores Thucydides as a historian for every age.

Berlin, 1811. In a meeting of the Prussian cabinet, one of the finance ministers proposes printing extra banknotes to pay off state debt. Horrified by this heresy against sound economics, the Chancellor's secretary (who tells this story in his diary) says, 'But minister, do you not remember what Thucydides said about the evils caused by paper money in Athens' – and wins the argument, as his opponent is unwilling to admit that he has never heard of the passage. Of course, that is because it does not exist, as there was no paper money in Athens, but the name of the ancient Greek historian has the authority to persuade even those who have not read his work. If you are tempted to think that we know better today, just look at the number of times Thucydides was quoted last year in newspaper articles and blogs about the Greek economic crisis, in absolute certainty that his work would help explain events.

## A study in power relations

Thucydides is cited again and again on Twitter as a source of inspirational quotations (or, just as often, misquotations) about war, politics, and (less predictably) personal development and spiritual growth – 'Self-control is the chief element in self-respect, and self-respect is the chief element in courage' (1.84.3). The idea of the 'Thucydides Trap', the claim that war is inevitable when a rising power confronts an established power, based on Thucydides' comment on the 'true cause' of war between Athens and Sparta at 1.23.6, is regularly discussed as template for relations between the USA and China. Other passages are cited to prove that it is, or is not, a good idea to reach an agreement with Iran about its nuclear programme, while the famous Melian Dialogue (5.84–111), where Thucydides dramatizes a confrontation between the

aggressive imperialistic Athenians and the small city they propose to destroy unless it surrenders unconditionally, is mentioned more or less every time a great power confronts a smaller one, whether Germany demanding concessions from Greece over austerity policies or Russia intervening in Ukraine. It is difficult to quantify, but Thucydides may be the most dominant and influential classical figure in the modern media, seen above all as someone who understands the way the world works.

## A historian left on the shelf

Taking the long view, this seems a remarkable development. In antiquity Thucydides was seen as an important historian, of course, but no more than that; a few took him as a model (Lucian, for example, a satirist from the second century A.D., in an essay 'How to Write History', and the sixth-century historian Procopius in his account of the plague in Constantinople under the emperor Justinian) but he was also fiercely criticized by others, like the critic Dionysius of Halicarnassus, for his difficult style and his approach to history. He was then entirely forgotten in the Latin-speaking West until the end of the Middle Ages; it was only in the fourteenth century that a copy of the speeches from his work was brought from the East and translated into Aragonese, and another century until the whole text was known, with a Latin version appearing in 1452 (after at least one leading scholar had refused to take on the task because of the difficulty of Thucydides' Greek). Even now, this remained a text just for the educated elite, and only a handful of them; compared with an accessible and popular writer like Plutarch, whose lives of great Greeks and Romans were full of entertaining stories and useful lessons, Thucydides seemed

austere and forbidding to most readers.

## A model for 'scientific' history?

Some scholars read Thucydides above all for the contents of his history: it was the main (often the only) source for the events of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, and most accounts of Greek history simply paraphrased it without any doubt about its reliability (if they had to choose between Thucydides' version of an event and someone else's, they almost invariably preferred him). The critical historians of the nineteenth century maintained this faith. The great Victorian historian of ancient Greece, George Grote, was sceptical about the possibility of extracting 'proper' history from Homer or the myths, as Thucydides had tried to do, and also questioned his objectivity in his portrayal of Cleon as a demagogue. As a result he had to defend himself against the outraged partisans of Thucydides (some of them politically motivated, others driven by scholarly concerns), insisting that in all other respects he admired and trusted the ancient Greek historian as much as they did.

The main reason for this trust was Thucydides' reputation as a model historian, a writer of unimpeachable integrity and objectivity. His earliest admirers tended to emphasize his character and experience: the fact that he had not only lived through the events he described but also been active as a general, and his even-handed treatment of Athenians and Spartans, despite being an Athenian himself – and despite the fact that they had sent him into exile. Later readers focused more on his methodology, set out in the famous passage in book 1. Thucydides showed awareness that witnesses can say different things and that the historian therefore needs to be critical, and he insisted that history must focus on the truth rather than on telling an entertaining story. This all fitted perfectly with the new idea of critical or scientific history developed in the nineteenth century: Thucydides seemed like a modern historian before modernity – and he offered a great rallying-cry for the usefulness and importance of history as a way of understanding the world. Not just his history,

but any history following his example, could be a possession for ever.

Such an interpretation depended on ignoring all the aspects of Thucydides' history that did not fit modern assumptions; most obviously the inclusion of speeches, which he himself stated were his own version of what it was appropriate for the speakers to have said, rather than an actual transcript. This seemed to twentieth-century historians to be much too rhetorical and literary for 'proper' history – and studies by classicists like F. M. Cornford which identified tragic influences and motifs in Thucydides' account reinforced this impression. For others, Thucydides' approach appeared to be too narrow and reductive, focusing on war and politics rather than culture and economics. Whereas he had once been seen as a model for all historians, by the middle of the century it was mainly just ancient historians who paid any attention, reading him largely as a source of historical facts or as a literary text with no particular relevance to the present.

### **... or for political theory?**

In the same period, however, Thucydides had found a new audience in a different academic discipline. There had long been a tradition of reading him not as a conventional historian but as a kind of political theorist, above all because of his claim that – because of 'the human thing' (1.22.4) – his readers could learn general principles or lessons from his account of the specific events of the Peloponnesian War. The first proper English translation in 1629 was by Thomas Hobbes, better known as a political philosopher, who drew on different aspects of Thucydides' thought, especially his depiction of the civil war at Corcyra (3.69–83), in his later work. Because Thucydides mattered to Hobbes, he mattered to a whole series of later thinkers in the political tradition, concerned about similar issues and problems: how can social order be maintained, how should societies be ruled, what is the role of public rhetoric?

### **The clash of the super-powers**

This was reinforced in the aftermath of the First World War. Thucydides had been used by all sides in the war as an inspirational text, justifying the need to fight for one's country. The great set-piece of the Funeral Oration (2.34–46), in which Pericles praised Athens' democratic culture and explained why this was worth dying to defend, was printed in cheap editions for soldiers at the Front, as well as being quoted on a poster on London buses, and after the war it featured on many public war memorials. Meanwhile, a number of classicists and historians

sought to prevent anything like the war happening again by focusing their efforts on the study of global politics. Figures like Arnold Toynbee and Alfred Zimmern, today largely forgotten, helped to invent the discipline of International Relations – and drew on Thucydides as a model for identifying general principles of interstate behaviour and the origins of wars, a history that was focused on the present.

Through the influence of these authors, Thucydides was taken up in the United States during the Cold War as a key text for understanding the new bipolar world and the clash of two different cultures (even if there was no agreement as to whether America or the Soviet Union should be Sparta or Athens). When the confrontation between East and West came to an end with the collapse of communism and the Warsaw Pact in 1989, Thucydides was reinterpreted as a key text for understanding a state of 'international anarchy', especially by IR scholars who saw him as the inventor of the doctrine, drawn above all from the Melian Dialogue and labelled Realism, that the world is governed solely by power and interest. Meanwhile, American military officers had been reading him since the early 1970s, as he became a key text for advanced students in the Naval War College and other training establishments.

### **A historian for all ages**

There are times when Thucydides appears to mean anything or everything. So many different readers have felt that he speaks directly to their own times, from the wars between Italian city states in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the sixteenth-century wars of religion and the English Civil War to the French Revolution and the modern Middle East. He described specific events, but in a way that implies they have a universal meaning, and with the explicit claim that people will be able to learn from his account to understand present and future events. Perhaps his greatest achievement is the way that he persuades his readers to trust him, and so he continues to be quoted as a source of wisdom and understanding.

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